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ABSTRACT

Profiles of 104 welfare recipients in Georgia were examined to identify social indicators and cognitive variables that influenced work role participation. Three instruments were administered the Career Thought Inventory, the Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy Scale-Short Form, and the demographic profile and participation scale of the Salience Inventory to determine how well race, education, dysfunctional career thoughts, and career decision-making self-efficacy predicted work role participation. It was found that, as a group, the welfare recipients in the sample defied stereotypes; they were older, better educated, and more heterogeneous than is typically reported. Among other findings were the following: (1) a majority of participants indicated at least some difficulty with dysfunctional career thoughts; (2) career decision-making self-efficacy was lower than that of a normative sample of college females; (3) black respondents spent more time in work activities than their white counterparts; (4) non-high school completers indicated more decision-making confusion and commitment anxiety, but less career decision-making self-efficacy than high school completers. It was concluded that career self-efficacy was the most important predictor of work role participation. It was suggested that service providers do the following: (1) incorporate coping mechanisms that recipients could employ to minimize obstacles to self-efficacy into employment intervention programs; and (2) employ awareness and sensitivity to the clash between the future-oriented nature of career/job training and day-to-day survival needs confronting welfare recipients.(There are three tables. The bibliography lists 51 references.)(AJ)

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Social Indicators, Dysfunctional Career Cognitions, and Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy in Work Role Participation of Welfare Recipients

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Abstract

Identification of social indicators and cognitive variables influencing work role participation of welfare recipients is important to the design of appropriate employment interventions for this population. This study developed a profile of 104 welfare recipients in Middle Georgia. It also examined the contribution of selected social indicators and four cognitive constructs to time spent in activities associated with work. Three instruments were administered—the demographic profile and Participation scale of the *Salience Inventory* (SI), the *Career Thoughts Inventory* (CTI), and the *Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy Scale-Short Form* (CDMSE-SF)—to determine how well race, education, dysfunctional career thoughts, and career decision-making self-efficacy predicted work role participation. Welfare recipients in this sample were older, better educated, and more heterogeneous than is typically reported. A majority of participants indicated at least some difficulty with dysfunctional career thoughts. Career decision-making self-efficacy of welfare recipients was lower than career self-efficacy in a normative sample of college females. *T*-tests revealed that Black recipients spent more time in work activities than White recipients, and non-high school completers indicated more decision-making confusion and commitment anxiety but less career decision-making self-efficacy than high school completers. Multiple regression analysis revealed that predictors accounted for 11.8 percent of the variance with supplementary analyses indicating that of the variables studied career self-efficacy was most important predictor of work role participation.

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Social Indicators, Dysfunctional Career Cognitions, and Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy in Work Role Participation of Welfare Recipients

Introduction

Federal legislation (Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, PL 104-193) and subsequent state directives have mandated that most individuals receiving welfare assistance obtain immediate employment. As a result, job-readiness and job-seeking programs have shifted focus from traditional periods of education and training to a "work first" approach (Friedman, 2001; Lent, 2001; Railey & Peterson, 2000). These programs and much recent research have emphasized the very real constraints of economic trends, external barriers, and inadequate employment skills of individuals who are poor (Cheatham, 1990; Olson & Pavetti, 1999; Rank, 1994). They have, however, minimally addressed intrapersonal needs. Despite recent census data reporting a reduction in poverty rates (Armas, 2000), individuals receiving welfare assistance continue to experience workplace problems (Brown, Reedy, Fountain, Johnson, & Dichiser, 2000; Dolgoff, Feldstein, & Skolnik, 1997; Seccomb, 1999). Although individuals receiving TANF (Temporary Aid to Needy Families) assistance may find immediate jobs that satisfy mandates and remove them from welfare rolls, they still experience problems of finding and keeping work that moves them out of poverty, off welfare rolls, and into stable employment over the long run (Catalfamo, 1998; Lent; Institute for Women's Policy Research [IWPR], 1997). Adding to the problem is the lack of empirical research about the occupational behavior of individuals who are poor (Arbonna, 2000; Bingham & Ward, 1997; Bowman, 1995; Brown, 1995; Chartrand & Rose, 1996; Leong & Hartung, 1997).

An additional problem is that most welfare-to-work programs have neglected cross-class issues. Certainly an important difference between welfare recipients and their service providers is social class (Lent, 2001). Bingham and Ward (1997) declared that social class variables interact with discrimination and other opportunity structures to either facilitate or hinder career choice and employment adjustment. Research by Payne (1998) revealed that generational poverty, defined as living in poverty for at least two generations, has its own cognitive impact in the form of hidden rules and belief systems that are necessary for survival. Most employment intervention programs, however, are not designed by persons from poverty but by persons from the middle- and upper-classes who may have been more privileged and experienced in efficacious ways when they entered the workforce (Lent, 2001; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1996; Rank, 1994). To paraphrase Herr's (1996) assertion that "A poor person is not simply a rich person without money" (p. 7), a welfare recipient is more than a person without a job. What is needed are interventions that can assist TANF recipients not only to locate immediate jobs but also to provide them with knowledge (both intrapersonal and occupational) to adjust to work role requirements and make important career and life decisions. In this way, immediate jobs have the potential of becoming long-term employment.

The importance of cognitive processes in influencing career behavior has been generally recognized (Bandura, 1997; Betz, 1999; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994; Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1990; Sampson, Peterson, Lenz, Reardon, & Saunders, 1996a). Emphasizing cognitive operations in the employment process shifts the focus from what choices are made to how they are made, acknowledging that individuals can influence their own employment behavior (Peterson, Sampson, & Reardon, 1991). In terminology used by Bandura and others (Betz, 2000; Betz & Luzzo, 1996), self-referent thought influences the extent to which individuals utilize approach rather than avoidance behaviors in making career decisions and solving employment problems. Thus, it is important to examine the role of self-referent thought in the career/employment problems of individuals who are poor, many of whom are minorities.

Acknowledging that racial and class issues influence development of self-referent cognitions, this study combined several cognitive-behavioral strains of research—Peterson et al.'s (1991) cognitive informational processing (CIP) career theory, Betz and Fitzgerald's (1995) career decision-making self-efficacy theory, and Super's (1990) role salience construct. Utilizing a descriptive research design and quantitative methodology with gender and socioeconomic status naturally controlled, the study (1) developed a demographic profile of selected social indicators of TANF recipients in the Middle Georgia area, (2) described participants' levels of dysfunctional career thoughts (decision-making confusion, commitment anxiety, and external conflict), career decision-making self-efficacy, and work role participation, and (3) determined which set of social indicators and cognitive variables selected for the study provided the best prediction of variation in the work role participation of TANF recipients.

Theoretical Framework

CIP conceptualizes an individual's career thought domains as a hierarchically-arranged pyramid of knowledge (both self and occupational), decision-making skills, and metacognitive skills. Based on CIP theory, Sampson et al. (1996a) proposed that cognitive schemata, which are used to screen and code incoming stimuli, may become dysfunctional and self-limiting for individuals, thereby impeding optimal career and employment outcomes. Dysfunctional career thoughts are conceptualized as decision-making confusion—an inability to initiate or sustain the decision-making process; commitment anxiety—an inability to make a commitment to a specific employment choice accompanied by generalized anxiety; and external conflict—an inability to balance one's own self-perceptions with input from significant others.

Found to have considerable application for the understanding and treatment of career development problems, career decision-making self-efficacy is an individual's degree of belief that he or she can successfully complete tasks and execute behaviors necessary for making career decisions (Betz & Hackett,1997; Hackett & Betz, 1981; Hackett, Betz, Casas, & Rocha-Singh, 1992, Taylor & Betz, 1983). Low self-efficacy expectations lead to avoidance behaviors, while high self-efficacy expectations increase the frequency of approach behaviors (Bandura, 1986). Career self-efficacy theory is particularly applicable to TANF recipients because it acknowledges that development of career domains are differentially affected by environmental forces (e.g., socioeconomic class, race, and education) and result in self-efficacy estimates that may diverge from ability (Chartrand & Rose, 1996).

Super's (1990) role salience theory includes the contribution of cognitive factors to work role participation (for example, approach behaviors equating to time spent in work activities). Role salience denotes the relative importance or degree to which a given role stands out from others (Ferreira-Marques & Miranda, 1995). In this study work role participation was defined as individuals' perceptions of the amount of time they spent on career and employment tasks relative to time spent on tasks associated with home and family, community service, student, and leisure activities. The purpose was to examine selected cognitive variables and their contribution to work role salience—conceptualized as welfare recipients' perceptions of time spent in work activities—variables that facilitate approach rather than avoidance behavior.

Method

Participants

Participants in the study were a convenience sample of 104 welfare recipients in four Middle Georgia counties who were attending *Work First* sessions at the Department of Family and Children Services (DFACS) and job training workshops at Middle Georgia Technical College and Goodwill Industries School of Work. I attended all sessions and workshops held from December through March and administered instruments to workshop attendees who volunteered to participate in the study.

Volunteer participants completed three instruments—the Career Thoughts Inventory (CTI; Sampson, Peterson, Reardon, Lenz, & Saunders, 1996b), the Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy Scale-Short Form (CDMSE-SF; Betz, Klein, & Taylor, 1996), and the profile section and Participation scale of the Salience Inventory (SI; Super & Nevill, 1985). A tape recorder was used to standardize reading of instrument items.

Welfare participants were mostly Black (77.9%) with Whites constituting about one-fifth of the sample (20.2%) and 2 individuals (1.9%) indicating they were of Hispanic or Asian origin. Because income assistance is tied to number of dependent children, data revealed as expected that most welfare recipients were single women primarily in the child-bearing and child-rearing years (between ages 20 and 39 with a mean of 29.4 years). Participants were diverse in level of education with a mean of 11.5 years of education. Levels varied from a small percentage of women who had completed grade 8 or less (2.9%) to participants who had completed 3 to 4 years of college (3.9%). Approximately 10 percent of participants were currently employed

Measures

Demographic data were collected via the demographic profile sections of the SI (Super & Nevill, 1985) and the CTI (Sampson et al., 1996b). Participants indicated their gender, marital status, occupational status, age, level of education, and race. Standards for selection of instruments included consideration of the reading limitations of participants, variations in their working speed and persistence in answering items, and fairness/applicability for test takers of different races, gender, or ethnic background (Prediger, 1994). The CTI (Sampson et al., 1996b) was used to assess participants' level of dysfunctional career thoughts. Defined as "outcomes of one's thinking about assumptions, attitudes, behaviors, beliefs, feelings, plans, and/or strategies related to career problem-solving and decision-making" (Sampson et al., 1996a, p. 2), career thoughts were inferred from participants' endorsement of statements reflecting a variety of types of dysfunctional thinking (Sampson, Peterson, Lenz, Reardon, & Saunders, 1999). The instrument consists of 48 items that represent career thoughts which inhibit or impede processing of information, such as "I get so depressed about choosing a field of study or occupation that I can't get started." Responses are scored on a four-point Likert scale with response options including (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) agree, and (4) strongly agree. High scores indicate presence of dysfunctional thoughts that impair an individual's ability to solve career problems and make career decisions. Scores were obtained for the three construct scales of decision-making confusion, commitment anxiety, and external conflict and for a general, over-all level of dysfunctional thought. For purposes of explanation of findings, scores were grouped according to four levels established by Sampson et al. (1996a), ranging from Level 1 (minimal amounts of dysfunctional thoughts) to Level 4 (considerable confusion and uncertainty accompanied by a number of career problems).

The Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy-Short Form (CDMSE-SF; Betz et al., 1996) asks respondents to indicate their confidence in successfully completing 25 career tasks, such as "How much confidence do you have that you could determine the steps you should take if you are having trouble with your chosen job?" It measures an individual's degree of belief that he or she can successfully complete tasks necessary for making career decisions. Responses are obtained on a 10-point scale ranging from 0 (no confidence at all) to 9 (complete confidence) with the minimum scale score being 0 and the maximum 225. A summation of scores was generated to obtain a career decision-making self-efficacy rating with higher scores reflecting greater confidence in career decision-making tasks. A generalized measure of career decision-making self-efficacy was obtained.

The Participation scale of the Salience Inventory (Super & Nevill, 1985) asks participants "What you actually do or have done recently" in each of the five life-career roles. It consists of 10 stems with the same five roles listed for each stem. Participants rate how true a statement is for each of the five roles on a scale from 1 (never or rarely) to 4 (almost always and a great deal). Participation items sample a variety of types and levels of participation, ranging from reading about a role to obtaining training in the role. The Participation scale does not measure how a person feels about a particular

role or how much he or she knows about it; instead it measures an individual's perception of time spent in the role.

Analyses

Data analysis for the first research objective—developing a demographic profile of selected social indicators of welfare recipients in Middle Georgia—consisted of descriptive statistics for social indicators (race, age, education, marital and occupational status), and levels of dysfunctional career thoughts, (decision-making confusion, commitment anxiety, and external conflict), career decision-making self-efficacy, and participation in the work role relative to four other life roles (home and family, community, student, and leisure). The second objective concerned comparative information when participants were grouped according to race and level of education. By race two groups were identified—White and Black. Two participants classified themselves as Other (Hispanic and Asian), but because of their small number were not included in the analysis. By level of education, two groups were also identified—individuals who had not completed twelfth grade (noncompleters) and individuals who had either completed twelfth grade or had indicated post-secondary school experience (completers). Data analysis of differences between the groups consisted of t-tests.
The third objective determined whether any of the explanatory variables in the study could predict with precision variation in work role participation. Multiple regression analysis was used for analyzing the collective and separate effects of race, education, decision-making confusion, commitment anxiety, external conflict, and career decision-making self-efficacy on welfare recipients' work role participation .

Findings

The first research objective was to describe recipients in the study and their levels of dysfunctional career thoughts, career decision-making self-efficacy, and work role participation. Findings challenge the stereotypical image of welfare recipients as teen-aged mothers with very little education who have never worked. In fact, study participants were older, better educated, and more heterogeneous than typically thought. Only a small percentage of welfare recipients in the study were below age 20 (4.8%). A majority of recipients were between ages 20 and 39 with a fairly equal dispersion within the child-bearing and child-rearing years—24 percent were between ages 20-24; 26 percent between 25-29; and 32.7 percent between 30-39. Likewise, the mean level of education (11.5 years) was higher than typically reported, with 41.3 percent of participants completing one to three years of high school and 36.5 percent completing grade twelve.

Results describing dysfunctional career thoughts, conceptualized as decision-making confusion, commitment anxiety, and external conflict, indicated at least some degree of difficulty with disabling and self-limiting career cognitions. Based on Sampson et al.'s (1996a) classification of intervention levels corresponding to the severity of career/employment problems (with Level 1 being the least amount of intervention needed and Level 4 the highest), the domain in which participants had the least amount of difficulty was decision-making confusion and the highest degree of difficulty was external conflict. Coefficient alpha for internal reliability was .91 for decision-making confusion, .86 for commitment anxiety, and .68 for external conflict.

Welfare recipients experienced varying levels of career decision-making self-efficacy with scores ranging from 32 to 210. As expected, findings revealed that levels of self-efficacy were lower in the sample of welfare recipients ($\underline{M}$=150.36, SD=40.95) than in the normative sample of college females ($\underline{M}$=178.2, SD=31.6; Betz & Taylor, 1994). Participants indicated more confidence in their ability to talk with a person already employed in the job in which they were interested and in defining the type of lifestyle they would like to live. The tasks in which they had the least confidence were making a plan of their goals for the next five years and determining the steps they should take if they were having trouble with their chosen job.

Table 1. Dysfunctional Career Thoughts—Descriptives for Specific Constructs

Construct	Range	*M*	*SD*	Median	Intervention Level
Decision-making confusion	0-42	13.75	8.49	13.00	2
Commitment anxiety	0-30	14.39	6.03	15.00	3
External conflict	0-15	6.03	3.16	6.00	3

As expected, the most salient life role for welfare recipients was home and family. Next was the work role, followed by leisure, study, and community service. TANF recipients had a lower mean score for the work role (M=26.61) and a higher mean score for the home and family role (M=34.23) as contrasted to the means of work (M=32.30) and home and family (M=28.24) in a normative sample (Nevill & Super, 1986). Since work participation was the focus of this study, a coefficient alpha for internal reliability of the Participation scale of the SI was computed only for the work role (r=.89).

Social indicators of race and level of education did account for some statistically significant differences in work role participation. esults indicated that Blacks spent more time than Whites doing or thinking abut work role activities. ifferences were, however, of little practical importance (p≤.03). Participants with less than a high school education had statistically significant higher levels of decision-making confusion (p≤.01) and commitment anxiety (p≤.015), but lower levels of career decision-making self-efficacy (p≤.006). One-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) were conducted and eta-squared statistics examined for the amount of variance explained by level of education. Eta-squared for each of the three variables was minimal—none of the variables accounted for over 7 percent of differences by education.

Multiple regression analysis measured contributions of race, education, and the four cognitive constructs of decision-making anxiety, commitment anxiety, external conflict, and career decision-making self-efficacy to variation in work role participation. The full regression model of 6 predictors was statistically significant (p≤.01). Only 11.8 percent of the variance could be explained by the full model, reflecting the multifaceted nature of work role participation. Thus, the regression equation has limited predictive utility. Supplementary analyses revealed that career decision-making self-efficacy was the single most important variable of those studied in predicting work role participation.

Table 2. Interrecorrelations among Race, Education, Work Role, and Four Cognitive Constructs

Variable	R	ED	WR	DMC	CA	EC	CDMSE
Race (R)		.055	-.200*	.025	-.037	.041	-.152
Education (ED)			.144	-.319**	-.344**	-.221	.209*
Work role (WR)				-.241*	-.157	-.193	.366**
Decision-making confusion (DMC)					.771**	.593	-.546**
Commitment anxiety (CA)						.607	-.404**
External conflict (EC)							-.322**
Career self-efficacy (CDMSE)							

*p≤.05; **p≤.01

Table 3. Regression Analysis For Race, Education, and Cognitive Variables Predicting Work Role Participation

Variable	B	SEB	*B*	Sig.
Race	-.2198	1.384	-.150	.116
Education	.346	.429	.080	.422
Decision-making confusion	-5.413E-02	.133	-.066	.685
Commitment anxiety	.104	.177	.091	.560
External conflict	-.192	.263	-.088	.465
Career decision-making self-efficacy	5.036E-02	.019	.298	.009

Note: $R^2_{adj} = .118$

Conclusions and Recommendations

The profile of TANF recipients that emerged from this study depicted a diverse group of individuals who did not conform to commonly held stereotypes. Thus, instead of assuming that welfare recipients need the same level of employment intervention—a one-size-fits-all mentality so characteristic of many job training programs for disadvantaged populations—it is important that researchers and practitioners accommodate instrumentation and instructional method for varying levels of education and work experience, much as they would expect to do with other populations under study. Reflecting economic and racial disparities between Blacks and Whites in Middle Georgia, a majority of recipients in this study were Black. In southern regions and other areas where such disparities are evident, it is vital that employment research and intervention strategies designed for welfare recipients incorporate disparate socializing influences experienced by Black and White women in addition to differences in social class. Barriers of racism, sexism, and classism must be taken into account with their accompanying influence on self-perceptions and employment behaviors.

Findings concerning dysfunctional career thoughts with higher levels of problems indicated in the commitment anxiety and external conflict domains can be examined in light of two components of career readiness recently proposed by Sampson, Peterson, Reardon, and Lenz (2000)—capability and complexity. According to the authors, readiness, an important antecedent for optimal employment attainments, can be defined as "the capability of an individual to make appropriate career choices, taking into account the complexity of family, social, economic, and organizational factors that influence an individual's career development" (p. 156). Welfare recipients in this sample experienced more difficulty with the complexity dimension (external contextual hindrances) as opposed to the capability dimension (decision-making confusion).

There is a need, however, for additional research on the reliability and validity of the external conflict scale of the CTI and the application of the entire instrument to welfare recipients. For example, one item reads, "I know what job I want, but someone's always putting obstacles in my way." Given the external constraints of living in poverty, this statement may be more accurate than dysfunctional. It would be important, therefore, that service providers incorporate into their employment intervention programs coping mechanisms that recipients could employ to minimize obstacles. In addition, the future-oriented nature of career/employment training clashes with day-to-day survival needs confronting welfare recipients. It is important to understand whether rules for surviving poverty and racial discrimination oppose the rules necessary for success in the workplace.

The expected finding of welfare recipients' low career self-efficacy as contrasted with levels of self-efficacy in a normative sample of college females is supported by recent research demonstrating the relationship between environmental hindrances and cognitive barriers (Betz, 1999; Betz & Hackett, 1997; Gainor & Lent, 1998; Hackett & Byars, 1996). Thus, even though immediate employment is the primary objective for under-employed TANF recipients, there is also an accompanying need for development of a healthy, positive career self-referent to integrate immediate and more long-term employment needs. Welfare individuals can be assisted in developing an awareness of their thoughts and beliefs so that they can determine which thoughts facilitate and which

thoughts hinder occupational success. Research has strongly supported the contention that self-efficacy is an important element in explanations of personal agency in the career process, particularly in the career development of women, certain racial-ethnic groups, and economically disadvantaged individuals (Chartrand & Rose, 1996; Fouad & Smith, 1996; Hackett & Betz, 1981; Meara, Davis, & Robinson, 1997).

Relatively small differences by race and education regarding dysfunctional career thoughts and career decision-making self-efficacy reveal the importance of economic and social class membership to cognitive processes. Findings also implied that a high school diploma may not only be associated with higher levels of academic skills, but also with higher estimations of confidence in performing career tasks and lower levels of inhibiting career thoughts.

The intent of this study was to gain a more accurate understanding of welfare recipients' thoughts about themselves in relationship to work not only to minimize incorrect assumptions by service providers and others but also to underscore the need to provoke recipient awareness that "thinking is for doing" (Fiske & Goodwin, 1994, p. 151). Findings revealed a relationship between self-referent career thought and work behavior, particularly concerning the strength of participants' efficacy expectations. The ability to facilitate positive change in the working lives of welfare recipients (that is, help them gain stable employment rather than experience spurts of intermittent, low-wage, bottom-tier jobs) involves becoming more aware of the link between thinking and doing.

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